FAQs about Avian Influenza

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?
Avian influenza is a virus that usually affects only birds. It circulates among the wild bird population and, like other flu viruses, can change or mutate. Avian influenza can affect a wide variety of birds, including migratory waterfowl and poultry. Each year, birds experience a flu season just like humans and, as with people, some forms of the flu are worse than others.

Are all "bird flus" the same?
The avian influenza virus can be configured into more than 144 strains, as determined by the DNA-level combinations of "H" and "N." For example, the virus may be classified as H1N2, H2N2 or H7N2.

What is the government doing to protect the U.S. food supply from avian influenza?
The likelihood of avian influenza-infected poultry entering the U.S. food supply is extremely low due to import restrictions, extensive disease testing programs, and state/federal inspection programs.

The United States prohibits poultry and poultry products from regions where avian influenza has been detected in commercial or traditionally raised poultry. Monitoring for illegally smuggled poultry and poultry products has increased. All live birds, including pet birds and live poultry, imported from approved countries (except Canada) are quarantined and tested upon entry.

Has the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, H5N1, been detected in migratory birds in the U.S.?
No. H5N1 has not been detected in wild birds or domestic poultry in North America. Wild waterfowl are the natural host of the virus. Since 1998, more than 12,000 migratory birds and waterfowl have been tested in Alaska. This year, more wild birds are being tested along their migratory paths—called flyways. Collectively, in the U.S., more than 100,000 wild birds will be sampled in 2006.

How do people become infected with avian influenza viruses?
Most cases of H5N1 avian influenza infection in humans have resulted from direct or close contact with infected birds or consuming under-cooked food. To date, researchers have seen no cases of sustained human-to-human transmission of avian flu.

What is an influenza pandemic?
A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic could occur if a new influenza virus emerges for which humans have little or no immunity. The disease causes serious illness and spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.

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Are any Americans infected with avian influenza?
No human cases of avian influenza have been identified in the United States and, to date, no Americans have been found to have been infected abroad. The current risk to Americans from the avian influenza outbreak in Asia, Europe, and Africa is very low.

Will a pandemic influenza occur? If so, when?
Many scientists believe it is a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs, based on historical cycles. However the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted. Influenza pandemics occurred three times in the past century—in 1918-19, 1957-58 and 1968-69.

Will eating poultry increase the risk for becoming infected with avian influenza?
No. Properly cooked and handled poultry is not a source of infection for avian influenza viruses of any strain. Furthermore, the likelihood of infected poultry entering the U.S. food supply is extremely low due to import restrictions, extensive disease testing, and federal inspection programs. Properly prepared and cooked poultry is safe to eat. Cooking poultry to an internal temperature of 170 degrees F. kills the avian influenza virus, as well as other organisms. While most human illnesses have resulted from direct contact with sick or dead birds, a small number have resulted from eating raw poultry or poultry products, so proper cooking is important in areas where avian influenza might be present.

I found a dead bird in my yard. What do I do?
Avian influenza is most often found in waterbirds, such as waterfowl (geese, ducks, swans), and shorebirds (sandpiper-type birds). The Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has joined with U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services in a state/federal partnership to initiate a pro-active wild waterfowl surveillance program. This will establish an early warning system for any evidence of disease in migratory waterfowl. Biologists from DNR and Wildlife Services will be handling all wildlife sampling and monitoring activities for Indiana.

If dead migratory geese, ducks, swans or shorebirds are found, DO NOT PICK UP THE BIRD FOR TESTING. Contact the Wildlife Conflicts Information Hotline at 800/893-4116 to report the location and number of dead waterfowl. DNR and Wildlife Services professional staff will determine if testing is necessary.

If testing is not necessary, the bird should be disposed of properly. Dead wild birds should not be handled with bare hands. To dispose of a dead bird, use gloves or a plastic bag turned inside out over the hand to pick up the bird. Double bag it and either bury it or dispose of it in the trash.

Can a person become infected with avian influenza by cleaning a bird feeder?
At the present time, backyard bird feeders present no risk of becoming infected with H5N1 virus. Generally, perching birds are the predominate species at backyard feeders. Most of the wild birds that are associated with H5N1 are waterfowl and shore birds. As always, hand washing after handling birds and feeders is always a good practice.